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Funding Needed for Struggling Communities

I recently wrote a letter to Gov. Beverly Perdue to encourage North Carolina to focus investment on the poorest and neediest communities should the federal government make good on the promise of sending hundreds of billions of dollars to states for infrastructure projects.

North Carolina's First Congressional District includes 17 of the state's 40 poorest counties, and they were hurting long before the current economic downturn. Without sufficient infrastructure, our communities will continue to struggle and fall further behind.

My letter to Gov. Perdue urged the state to use this opportunity to focus on providing assistance to counties with the greatest needs. Last month during the congressional recess, I organized a series of meetings with county and local officials who consistently expressed the desperate need for help in strengthening and building local infrastructure.

Five counties in the First Congressional District are suffering double-digit unemployment, including Edgecombe County, which has the state's highest unemployment rate at 13.3 percent. And, of the 23 eastern North Carolina counties I represent, only four – Craven, Gates, Herford and Wayne counties – have unemployment rates lower than the statewide average of 7.8 percent.

Local and county officials expressed the need for road and bridge improvements, airport development, water systems, wastewater treatment facilities, school improvements and blight removal.

Infrastructure growth is critical not only to these communities' quality of life, but also to their ability to attract and retain businesses. Without significant help, the costs of these projects are well beyond the means of these communities.

I strongly support the concept of a federal economic stimulus that would quickly provide funding for new, "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects. Congress and President-elect Barack Obama are working on a multi-billion dollar package that could include funding for infrastructure, government-assisted healthcare insurance and unemployment compensation. Tax cuts for workers and businesses may also be included. Congressional leaders have expressed hope that a package could be ready to be signed into law by mid-February.

Restoring Americans' Right to Challenge Discrimination

The House has approved legislation that would reverse a Supreme Court ruling that made it more difficult for Americans to pursue pay discrimination claims.

The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act would clarify that every paycheck resulting from an earlier discriminatory pay decision constitutes a violation of the Civil Rights Act. This means that as long as workers file their charges within 180 days of a discriminatory paycheck, their charges would be considered timely. This was the law prior to the Supreme Court's May 2007 decision.

The Ledbetter decision has already been cited in more than 300 discrimination cases. Not only have pay discrimination cases been adversely impacted, but protections guaranteed by the Fair Housing Act, Title IX, and the Eight Amendment have also been adversely affected.

The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act would apply to workers who file claims of discrimination on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, religion, age or disability.

The bill was named after Lilly Ledbetter, who worked for nearly 20 years at Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. She sued the company after learning that she was paid far less than her male counterparts at the facility, despite having more experience. A jury found that her employer had unlawfully discriminated against her on the basis of sex.

However, the Supreme Court said that Ledbetter had waited too long to sue for pay discrimination, despite the fact that she filed a charge with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as soon as she received an anonymous note alerting her to pay discrimination.

While Ledbetter filed her charge within 180 days of receiving discriminatory pay, the court ruled that, since Ledbetter did not raise a claim within 180 days of the employer's original decision to pay her less, she was barred from relief. Under this Supreme Court decision, employees in Ledbetter's position would be forced to live with discriminatory paychecks for the rest of their careers.

The House-passed bill is the same as the bill approved in 2007. President-elect Obama has indicated his strong support for the measure.

Requesting USPS Mailbox for Lake Gaston

I have asked the U.S. Postal Service to provide the Lake Gaston area with postal collection box.

Lake Gaston area residents have been forced to travel up to 32 miles roundtrip just to ensure that sensitive mail has a secure place. Installing a mailbox in the area certainly seems like a simple, low-cost and reasonable solution.

I made a written request to U.S. Postmaster General John E. Potter for the mailbox because Lake Gaston residents have expressed concerns about the security of their home mailboxes and the inconvenience of traveling to simply mail a letter.

My office has talked with Littleton Postmaster Carrie Brown, who indicated that the best location for a USPS collection box would be the Food Lion Shopping Center at 2455 Eaton Ferry Road in Littleton. Postmaster Brown also said the Littleton Post Office would be able to service the collection box.

It's a small thing that could help people in a big way.

Import Opportunities with the 2010 Census

The Decennial Census of 2010 is quickly approaching. The Census is a constitutionally mandated obligation of immense significance – it is used in determining representation in the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures and local governments.

The Census is also used in distributing about \$300 billion in federal funding annually to states and localities for public programs in education, healthcare, public transportation, criminal justice, community development and housing. Historically, residents in poor or rural communities have often been undercounted. Undercounting makes it more difficult for our communities to receive the resources they need and deserve.

The U.S. Census Bureau has opened local offices all across the country and will be hiring citizens to help with the Census. Applicants will be hired from almost every community and are selected based on the hiring needs of each particular area. Most hiring will take place February through May 2009.

The area's local Census office is at 615/617 Red Banks Road in Greenville. People are encouraged to call the office about employment opportunities at (252) 493-7040. Employment information is also available by calling the toll-free jobs line at 1-866-861-2010. TTY users should call the Federal Relay Service at 1-800-877-8339.

Additional information can also be found at: <http://www.census.gov/2010census/>

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